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ABSTRACT

In addressing the problem of assessing culturally and linguistically diverse students for special education eligibility, this brief paper organizes suggested strategies according to four principles: (1) convening a full, multidisciplinary assessment team (to include parents, educators, assessors, and a person familiar with the student's culture and language); (2) using pre-referral strategies and interventions to determine whether difficulties stem from language or cultural differences, a lack of educational opportunity, or from a disability); (3) determining the language to be used in testing (assessment of language dominance and proficiency); and (4) conducting a tailored, appropriate assessment of the child and environment that combines nonbiased, appropriate instruments with other sources of information (observations, interviews) from a variety of environments to produce a multidimensional assessment. (DB)

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Assessment of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students for Special Education Eligibility

Jane Burnette

The assessment of students with cultural and linguistic differences (CLD) has become one of special education's major issues. These students are disproportionately represented in special education, a fact that leads us to examine an assessment process that is difficult at best. There is a shortage of personnel qualified to assess culturally and linguistically diverse students (Flores, Lopez, & DeLeon, 2000) and the assessment tools available are woefully inadequate. Teachers and other staff who feed into this process are not provided with sufficient training. In addition, schools are struggling with related issues that affect such assessments, including how to involve parents of different cultures and languages who may not be aware of the schools' expectations of them and their part in the process, who may experience frustrations related to language or cultural differences, and who may not have the time, transportation, or child care capabilities to attend meetings scheduled at the school's convenience.

In recognition of these difficulties, a number of solutions and best practices have been developed. In general, these practices can be organized according to four principles:

- Convening a full, multidisciplinary assessment team—Parents, educators, and assessors are part of any assessment team. Other integral members of the team include interpreters, bilingual educators, and a person who is familiar with the student's culture and language.
- Using pre-referral strategies and interventions—If a student is having difficulties, information should be gathered to determine whether these difficulties stem from language or cultural differences, from a lack of opportunity to learn, or from a disability.
- Determining the language to be used in testing—Assessment of language dominance and proficiency should be completed before further testing is conducted for students whose home language is other than English.
- Conducting a tailored, appropriate assessment of the child and environment—Ideally, nonbiased, appropriate instruments should be combined with other sources of information (observations, interviews) from a variety of environments (school, home, community) to produce a multidimensional assessment.

A Full, Multidisciplinary Assessment Team

The 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that when a student is assessed, someone familiar with the student's cultural and linguistic background must be part of the assessment team. This person can be a valuable source of information about the culture and the student, as well as providing a key to understanding the results of test data and other aspects of the assessment process. If the child being evaluated is bilingual, it is recommended that the team also include a bilingual educator (McLean, 2000).

In addition, IDEA requires that parents of each child with a disability be members of any group that makes decisions on the educational placement of their child. Parents are crucial to understanding the student's background and how the student functions in the home and in the community. Parents can provide information that forms a framework for understanding the information about the student, and the parent's perspective can be invaluable for accurately interpreting data as well as for subsequent planning and instruction.

If an interpreter will be used during the assessment process, he or she will need to understand the context and purpose of the discussions in order to accurately translate the meaning of what was said. Prior to meetings, it is important to acquaint the interpreter with the purpose of the meeting and the topics that will be investigated, and after meetings, to spend time reviewing results. Care must be taken to ensure that he or she understands the technical language used. Interpreters should be encouraged to ask for clarification when needed and to take notes. When assessors work with interpreters, both need to be trained in conducting parent interviews.

Educators and assessors also need training to ensure accurate placement decisions. Acquiring a second language can produce complex effects on the child's language, cognitive and social development (McLean, 2000). In many school districts, assessors have not been trained to understand cultural, linguistic and experiential differences and their impact on a child's development and test performance. A trained and experienced assessor develops a clinical memory that serves as a resource of information and wisdom. The time spent on training will help to ensure the accuracy of information gathered and the quality of decisions. A number of team interaction models, such as the Transdisciplinary Team Assessment model, can be used to help structure and guide the team.

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Pre-referral Strategies

One key to reducing inappropriate placement in special education is to reduce inappropriate referrals for evaluation. Educators should carefully collect and analyze information on a CLD child prior to making a referral for special education evaluation. Information about the child's culture and development, and a comparison to the development of other children from a similar background should be taken into account. It is also important to determine if the student has had an opportunity to learn. This involves examining both the quantity of schooling (whether the student has been in school continuously and has received instruction) and the quality of schooling (including teacher variables and instructional variables). If the student's learning problems are related to either of these variables, interventions should be directed to the identified variables (Leung, 1996). Among teacher variables are experience, expectations, teaching style, and track record with diverse students. Instructional variables include approaches that support the active involvement of the student. Examples are reciprocal teaching and instructional conversation that provides for "comprehensible input"—instruction or conversation that is conceptually and linguistically comprehensible to the learner.

To examine if prior instruction has facilitated or foiled the child's learning, determine if

- lessons have shared goals,
- students and parents understand the goals of lessons,
- new learning is linked to prior knowledge,
- both cognitive and metacognitive strategies are taught,
- information is organized (sequentially, if possible)
- instruction is provided in phases, yet is nonlinear, and
- lessons take the child's development into account.

A variety of pre-referral strategies are available to educators, and techniques such as curriculum-based assessment can be used to tell if instruction has made a difference.

Language Assessment

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires a language assessment of any child who may be limited English proficient, including an assessment of the child's proficiency in English as well as in his or her native language in order to distinguish language proficiency from disability needs. This act states that an accurate assessment should include objective assessment of reading, writing, speaking, and understanding. Further, IDEA requires that "any materials and procedures used to assess a child with limited English proficiency are selected and administered to ensure that they measure the extent to which the child has a disability and needs special education rather that measuring the child's English language skills."

An Appropriate Assessment Tailored to the Child

The job of the assessment team is to develop a comprehensive, multidimensional assessment tailored to the child being evaluated. Such an assessment includes both formal testing (e.g., standardized tests) and informal testing (e.g., interviews and observations) in a variety of environments (e.g., home and community).

IDEA '97 requires that tests and other evaluation materials are "selected so as not to be discriminatory on a racial or cultural basis; and are provided and administered in the child's native language or other mode of communication, unless it is clearly not feasible to do so." Any formal tests that might be used should be examined for cultural bias by a person from the cultural group and should be administered by a person who is very knowledgeable about the child's cultural group and speaks the child's language or dialect (McLean, 2000). If modifications are required to make the instrument appropriate, the test should be used to provide descriptive information only (rather than scores), since modifications may invalidate the scoring of the test.

While valuable information can be obtained from standardized tests, their nature and cultural specificity make them useful as only part of an assessment. Informal testing, such as curriculum-based assessments, observations, interviews, and play-based assessments can provide information unavailable through standardized testing. When reviewing the assessment information, the team should look for corroboration among the results of the various types of assessment data. For example, if a student is said to have a problem with "auditory processing," the problem should be evident not only on tests, but also in the classroom and at home. For students with limited English proficiency, the auditory processing problem should be evident not only in English, but also in the student's native language (Leung, 1966).

Once the assessment is completed, the group of qualified professionals and the child's parents must determine if the child has a disability, and move on to developing an instructional plan for the child regardless of whether or not the child is considered disabled. While there is great concern that children who do not have disabilities will be assessed as having them because of cultural or linguistic differences, there are also cases in which children who do have disabilities have gone unserved because of the difficulty of distinguishing between cultural or linguistic differences and disability. According to Leung (1966), "Assessment must be a means to an end. As such, the ultimate quality indicator of assessment is how directly the results aid in instructing the student."

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